

The Divine Messenger in Ancient Greece, Etruria and Rome

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1. Introduction

The concept of the divine messenger – both male and female – in Homeric epics, which are for us the beginning of Greek literary tradition, in the first place tells us something about man. He appears as a being standing between the sensual phenomena in time and space and the world of the divine, of the superhumanly powerful which is perceived by his spirit-soul. At the same time this expresses the tension and the basic contrasts that concern the world and man: One contrast concerns the cosmos, the other man. As light and darkness, heaven and earth are placed in opposition to one another, so spirit and body as well as internal and external perception are inside man. As the senses inform about the external world, so does the spirit, which surpasses the merely logical faculties of reason, about the operating of the divine.

Homer and his age have seen the divine particularly in the Olympic or heavenly gods ruled by Zeus, the Indo-European lord of the heavens. For these early Greeks' experience the reception of certain revelations from the divine world by way of the spiritual soul corresponded to the impressions of the senses. Thus men of the Homeric age entered into a dialogue with reality which was oneness in twoness and multiplicity like they themselves. The sensual and the divine here correspond to one another like body and spiritual soul. Far up into the historical centuries of Greek, Etruscan and Roman cultures the world of sensual phenomena, that is of the *kosmos* or the *physis/natura* as well as phenomena in man's inner self (just thinking of special dreams and visions), has revelatory character. Into this context also belong the concepts of the divine messenger (who is now imagined as a humanoid, now as bird-shaped) and divine messages.

The Greek term for the divine messenger, ἄγγελος, was transmitted into European languages by way of the Latin *angelus*. The human-personal nature is present in an intensified way in the divine messen-

ger who descends from the heights of heaven to men. Single sensual phenomena have helped to elaborate the ideas of divine messengers, whether the remarkably effective bird of prey, or the voice from heaven experienced as thunder or some other surprising sounds.¹

For the appearance of the divine in sensual phenomena, for the theophany and kratophany – to which the presently discussed religious concept belongs – its suddenness, its unforeseeability is a characteristic feature.

Another way of visualizing the divine messenger resulted from ancient belief in spirits which includes reckoning with influences of Eastern cultures including the Ancient Near East as well.²

With regard to this theme the singers of Homeric epic poems – the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* – have impressed the following ages until the end of Antiquity. What classical poets of the 5th century BC, what Hellenistic epic and lyrical poets and their Roman successors say about the divine messenger often is just an imitation and variation of respective Homeric scenes and suggestions.³ Besides, since the end of the 5th century BC also criticism and parody are to be found, thus with Euripides and Aristophanes.⁴

When in Homer the male or female divine messenger appears in an immortal, remarkably beautiful human form, i.e. in an Olympic god or goddess, this god or goddess is more than this one function reveals. The Greek deities are exceedingly complex formations; within centuries they were elaborated; influences from pre-Greek culture are discernible as well as influences from the Ancient Near East. This is especially true for Hermes.⁵ The singers of Homeric epic poems have particularly fashioned two deities as divine messengers: Iris and Hermes.

2. Iris

In the *Iliad* Iris is messenger of the Olympic gods Zeus and Hera.⁶ She appears as messenger before deities and men, before Greeks and Trojans. Adjectives like “fast as the windy storm”, “tempest-footed”, or

1 See below p. 41.

2 See below p. 43.

3 Mayer, *Iris* 331f.; Pease, *Vergili* 529f., 535-537 regarding 4:693-695; 700-704.

4 Euripides, *Heracles* 822f.; cf. Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Euripides* 121-123; Aristophanes, *Aves* 1196-1259.

5 Fauth, *Hermes*; Herter, *Hermes*; Baudy, *Hermes*; Zusanek, *Hermes*.

6 Mayer, *Iris* 325-332; Bruchmann, *Epitheta* 161f.; cf. Pease, *Ciceronis* 1086f. ; for 3:51; Bömer, *Ovidius* 105 ; for 1:270; Hunger, *Lexikon* 248f.

“with golden wings” indicate her extreme swiftness.⁷ At first the goddess Iris and the rainbow, *iris*, probably were different ideas. Later on the rainbow could be seen as the goddess’s track.⁸

When Hera and Athena were about to support the Greeks, Zeus sends Iris to announce to them his veto.⁹ Correspondingly, she hurries to see Poseidon to transmit to him Zeus’ order not to keep on assisting the Trojans.¹⁰ On the other hand, she conveys an encouraging command of Zeus to Hector, as well.¹¹ Once even Hera sends her, namely to Achilles, so that he might rescue the slain Patroklos from the Trojans.¹² In the late last book she already shares her role with Hermes who has displaced her completely in the *Odyssey*. In later times the two messengers are related to each other in such a way that Iris more belongs to Hera, and Hermes to Zeus. In addition, a different estimation is to be seen: Iris conveys bad news, Hermes pleasing messages.¹³

3. Hermes

As compared with Iris Hermes is an extremely complex god whose history goes back via Arcadia to Babylonia when we consider the planetary god Hermes / Nebo.¹⁴ His function as divine messenger forms one element among numerous others, though this was so important for the author of the Homeric hymn on Hermes that right in the beginning he emphasizes it: “Celebrate in a song, Muse, Hermes, the son of Zeus and Maja..., the blessing-bringing messenger of the immortals”.¹⁵

The historical transition from the *Iliad* to the *Odyssey* is marked among other things by the fact that in the *Iliad*’s last and latest canto Hermes – and no longer Iris – is sent by Zeus to safely accompany King

7 *Ilias* 2:786; 5:353 and more often – 8:409 and more often – 8:398; 11:185 besides the adjectives ταχεία, ὠκέα “fast”.

8 Pease, *Ciceronis* 1086f.; Hunger, *Lexikon* 248f.

9 *Iliad* 8:397-425.

10 *Iliad* 15:143-219.

11 *Iliad* 11:185-210.

12 *Iliad* 18:165-202.

13 Servius ad *Aeneidem* 5:606; 9,2; Mayer, *Iris* 331f.; cf. Pease, *Vergili* 529 for Vergilius, *Aeneis* 4:694: *Irim*.

14 Cicero enumerates no less than five different gods called Hermes / Mercurius, four of them having different genealogies: *de natura deorum* 3:56; cf. Pease, *Ciceronis* 1107-1114. See also above n. 5. – Jeremias, *Nebo* 57-60.

15 V.1-3; *Orphicorum fragmenta* 297,1 (Kern) = 413F,1 (1,342 Bernabé) he is called *Angelos*; Bruchmann, *Epitheta* 104 s.v. ἄγγελος.

Priam on his way from Troja to the Greek camp.¹⁶ The function of a guide here outweighs the function of the messenger.¹⁷ The original meaning of the fixed epithet of Hermes διάκτορος (with and without) ἀργειφόντης is not clear, it was probably taken from older pre-Homeric poetry.¹⁸ Later on διάκτορος was understood as meaning "messenger". In this way Kallimachos once characterizes the owl of the goddess Athena, or Antipatros of Sidon the eagle of Zeus.¹⁹

Hermes' mediating activity is essential. It is evident in another passage of the Iliad: Zeus passes on the sceptre made for him by Hephaistos to Hermes, who is called a "ruler" here, and he transmits it to Pelops from whom Atreus, Thyestes, and Agamemnon receive it.²⁰ Thus this god is a mediator between King Zeus and the hero-kings.

His messenger role is elaborated more in detail in the Odyssey, which was written later than the Iliad. Right in the beginning Athena asks the Olympic gods to send Hermes to the nymph Kalypso so that she will dismiss Odysseus and the hero may return home. Zeus then commands his son to execute this commission.²¹ Sent by Zeus Hermes approaches Aigisthos to warn him against marrying Klytaimnestra and killing Agamemnon. But he was not successful here.²²

Hermes thus connects the celestial world with the terrestrial one of man, and often so even crossing the earthly limits, the boundary of life. As he passes the threshold towards earthly life, so he does pass the threshold towards life after death. With his wand he closes men's eyes and wakes them again from sleep.²³ His way of operating is bipolar or ambivalent.²⁴ like that of gods in general. As a guide of souls, Psychopompos, he accompanies the souls of the suitors whom Odysseus has slain, to the netherworld, to Hades or the subterranean Zeus.²⁵ So Her-

16 Iliad 24:333-338.

17 Iliad 24:153, 182, 437, 461: πομπός.

18 Iliad 2:103; 21:497; 24:339 and often in the Odyssey; Homer, hymnus in Mercurium 392; Bruchmann, Epitheta 105.

19 Callimachus, frg. 519 (Pfeiffer); Antipater Sidonius: Anthologia Graeca 7:161,1; see below 40.

20 Iliad 2:100-109.

21 Odyssey 1:84-87; 5:28-148.

22 Odyssey 1:35-43.

23 Odyssey 5:47f.; 24:3f.; cf. Vergilius, Aeneis 4:242-244 (Pease): *tum virgam capit; hac animas ille evocat Orco / pallentis, alias sub Tartara tristia mittit.*

24 Speyer, Christentum 3, 15-33.

25 Odyssey 24:1-14; cf. Homer, hymnus in Mercurium 571f.; Hermes is the "Angelos" guiding to Hades. For Hermes Angelos cf. Bernabé, Poetae 342, regarding Orphicorum fragmenta 413F,1; further Raingeard, Hermes; Kerényi, Hermes; Nußbaum, Geleit 952-954.

mes connects the hereafter with the present world, and the present world with the hereafter within a human scope.

As with Iris so also with Hermes the swiftness of his errand is praised. That is why in illustrations the god is wearing wings, wings on his shoes and on his cap.²⁶ The Iliad does not yet mention them, but it says that he can fly.²⁷ The wings Hermes is wearing link him with birds, more precisely with those birds which were considered to be Zeus' messengers.²⁸ In illustrations Hermes is wearing the *kerykeion*, Latin *caduceus*, the herald's wand characteristic of him, which is now shaped like a Y, now like two serpents facing each other, now like the figure eight.²⁹

As messenger the god is at the same time the emissary and thus the representative of the supreme and all-deciding power, even so his father, the lord of the heavens, Zeus. As his son Hermes in his messenger-function transmits his father's commands to gods and men, namely in cases that have really occurred. So he belongs to supernatural intermediary beings like Iris.

Between this function of Hermes and the human soul there are the following correspondences: Like Hermes the spirit-soul is distinguished by swiftness, spontaneity, and presence. Therefore, the Greeks pictured the soul as winged and so to speak bird-shaped.³⁰ The soul, conceived as breath-soul, seemed to belong to the element of air or aether and so to the region of heaven.³¹ Accordingly also Psyche, Eros' beloved, has wings, sometimes those of a butterfly, which indicate the change of the soul's form.³² Like Hermes as the divine messenger is an intermediary between heaven, earth and the netherworld, between the present world and the hereafter, so is the human soul, too. Therefore, the soul and the god Hermes in his function as messenger and interpreter can appear as related to one another.³³ Not without this inner relation to one another the cult of Hermes as Hermes Logios became established in Antiquity.³⁴

26 Ley, Hermes II 431f.

27 Iliad 24:340-342. Aristophanes, Aves 573, mentions them; cf. Pease, Vergili, considering Vergilius, Aeneis 4:240.

28 See below 40.

29 The Iliad just mentions the wand: 24:343; cf. Odyssey 5:47; 24:3; de Waele, Magic 29-79: "Hermes-Mercurius".

30 Weicker, Seelenvogel; Rohde, Psyche, Reg.: "Seele, geflügelt...".

31 Rohde, Psyche, Reg.: "Aether", "Seelenreich in der Luft...".

32 Hunger, Lexikon 453-456, especially 454.

33 Orphicorum fragmenta 297,1 Kern = 413F,1 (1,342 Bernabé with parallels); Plato, Cratylus 407e; Kühnen, *interpret* 2251,31-42; Fauth, Hermes 1074; Jung, Geist 230-235.

34 Fauth, Hermes 1075; Herter, Hermes 195 note 5.

4. Birds

Since those gods who effect life and prosperity were imagined to dwell in heavenly regions, signs in the sky, especially if produced by birds, could be understood as messages from these deities, especially of the gods' father Zeus / Iuppiter. Birds were taken to be intermediary messengers; in particular the impressively large birds, the eagle and the vulture, were seen as divine messengers since the earliest phases of religion history in Antiquity.³⁵ Very often it reveals the divine purpose to the political-religious leader who is conceived as being the deity's elect.

It was also relevant for perceiving a bird as a divine messenger that it appeared and vanished unexpectedly and suddenly, that it was swift and not subject to human wishes.

Such birds interpreted as divine messengers seemed to express divine intentions by their nature and actions. Again the Iliad is the first text to talk about such a message: Zeus sends his eagle, "the most reliable among the augural birds". It held a fawn in its claws and threw it onto the altar where the Achaeans were worshipping Zeus by sacrificing. This message not given through words, but through an action encouraged the Danaeans so that they fought the Trojans with a fresh boldness.³⁶ That is why the eagle is called "Zeus' messenger, *angelos*",³⁷ as well. Thereby we touch the extensive field of Greek, and especially Etruscan and Roman augural practice, which consisted for the most part in observing the birds' flight, their cries and eating.³⁸

Besides the eagle two different kinds of vultures were taken as messengers of the celestial, especially in Etruria and Rome. These ornithological species were often mixed up in Antiquity. But it is important that all three were interpreted as divine messengers until the age of the Roman emperors.³⁹

However, other birds could appear as divine messengers as well. According to the tradition from Dodona both the oracles in Libya and Dodona were founded because there had appeared a black dove coming from Thebes in Egypt. In Dodona the black dove is said to have

35 Speyer, Geier 438-441; 446-451; 454.

36 Iliad 8:247-252.

37 Iliad 24:290-298; 314-321; Aratus, Phaenomena 522f. (73f. Martin).

38 *Auspicium*, *auspico*, *auspicator*, *auspex* with an etymolog easily seen through: "to observe the birds".

39 See above 36.

rested on an oak and to have demanded in a human voice to establish an oracle. The same happened in Libya.⁴⁰

With important undertakings, particularly when they were about to begin something, such as a military campaign or action or the founding of a town, Etruscans and Romans paid attention to the augury birds mentioned above. According to an Etruscan-Roman tale six and twelve vultures appeared to the founders of Rome, Remus and Romulus.⁴¹ The augury of twelve vultures is said to have occurred to Octavianus / Augustus as well, when he became consul for the first time.⁴²

5. Divine Voices

Antique grammarians already interpreted the divine messenger Iris also as a divine or heavenly voice.⁴³ The blending of a divine voice with a divine person seemed obvious enough. Here, too, Zeus was considered as the true originator as with his messages which were delivered by Iris or Hermes. Ossa, the voice, more precisely the rumour attributed to Zeus, could be called “messenger of Zeus”.⁴⁴ In these cases it was the primary interest to perceive a divine revelation – similar to the oracles and other miraculous voices proceeding from sacred groves, from animals or also from men. Correspondingly PHEME, the divine voice, also appears as divine messenger and even as a goddess besides revelatory dreams.⁴⁵ So the word and the message might appear as an almost divine being like a divine figure. Actually, revelation could become manifest to the Greeks, Etruscans, and Romans in a very diversified way. Now the sense of seeing, now the sense of hearing prevails. In these interpretations originates the widespread antique belief in omens, Greek *terata*, Latin *prodigia*, *portenta*, *omina*, *ostenta* and *monstra*, which are a central subject of the Greek, and even more of the Etruscan and Roman religion.⁴⁶

40 Herodotus 2,54-57 with a rationalistic interpretation of the tradition by the historian.

41 Ennius, *annales* 72-91 (76f. Skutsch); Speyer, Geier 448f.

42 Suetonius, *vita divi Augusti* 95; Speyer, Geier 450f.; 454.

43 Hesychius s.v. *Iris* (2,374 Latte); *Etymologicum Magnum* 475,45; cf. Speyer, *Himmelsstimme* 288-293.

44 *Iliad* 2:93f.; *Odyssey* 1:282f.; 2:217f.; cf. *Odyssey* 24:412f.; Schmidt, Ossa.

45 Xenophon, *convivium* 4:48; Voigt, PHEME.

46 Speyer, *Christentum* 2, 207-219 (bibliography).

6. Spirits as Messengers and Guides

In Greece spirits / demons (sometimes also called *angeloi*) particularly fulfil functions that are characteristic of angels in Judaism and in Christian contexts. We do not yet find them in the Homeric poems, but in Hesiod, namely in his book "Works and Days", which is closely related to popular belief. The passage on the four ages of times says about the first generation, men living in the Golden Age: They died, nevertheless they became beneficent demons after death and thus also preservers of right. The poet calls them nearly guardian angels, namely "attendants of mortals".⁴⁷ He modifies the idea later on, talking about 30,000 immortal servants of Zeus and keepers of mortals".⁴⁸ In Hesiod, who is the first Greek poet whom we know as an individual historical person, the idea of guarding individual existence would probably germinate.⁴⁹ The connections to believing in souls are evident – the heroes, who belong to the 4th human generation in Hesiod, are deified souls as well.⁵⁰ Since Hesiod the idea of beings that are supposed to come in between the celestial and men developed more and more. Famous are Diotima's words in Plato's Symposium: "For all demonic is in between god and the mortal. – And what kind of activity ... does it have? To interpret and to deliver to the gods what comes from men, and to men what comes from the gods: prayers and sacrifices of the one party and commands and recompense for the sacrifices of the other... God does not have intercourse with man, but any divine contact and dialogue with man is accomplished through this, be it in a state of being awake or sleeping".⁵¹

The demons / spirits assigned to the celestial deities could also be characterized as these gods' servants.⁵² In following Plato the concept of a protective spirit attached to each single human was developed by philosophers related to Plato – among these also Aristotle – and by Stoics as well.⁵³ This protective spirit or beneficent demon can guide the soul into Hades like Hermes does.⁵⁴

47 Hesiodus, opera et dies 121-126.

48 Hesiodus, opera et dies 252-255; cf. Andres, Daimon 282f.

49 Cf. Nußbaum, Geleit 911f.

50 Hesiodus, opera et dies 156-173; Speyer, Heros 862f.

51 Plato, convivium 202e-203a; important also the logos of Lachesis in the final myth in Plato's republic (de re publica 10,617e): "Not you will be rescued by (the) daimon, but you will choose (the) daimon". Cf. ter Vrugt-Lentz, Geister 613f.

52 Andres, Daimon 283f.

53 Zintzen, Geister 640-647; Nußbaum, Geleit 912f.

54 Platon, de re publica 10,620d. Phaedon 107d-108c; Nußbaum, Geleit 949f.; cf. note 25 above.

But because there was the concept of subterranean gods as well, one supposed even here that demonic intermediary beings existed – who were sometimes called *angeloi*.⁵⁵ Plato already mentions an *angelos* speaking to souls in his myth of the hereafter which he has the Armenian Er narrate.⁵⁶ Curses inscribed in Attic tablets invoked subterranean angels.⁵⁷ Good and evil demons or spirits effecting welfare and blessing or evil correspond to celestial and subterranean deities. Hermes, who at first was an intermediary between the Olympic gods and the powers in Hades, could become a mere deity of the netherworld besides Ge, Persephone, the Praxidikei, and the Erinyes.⁵⁸ A separation of deities and demons / spirits bringing blessing from those effecting evil occurred only within the antique history of ideas, especially because the old religious and magical-religious conceptions were pervaded by moral-religious views. Iranian ideas of metaphysical dualism will also have influenced this process.⁵⁹

The Near East substantially contributed to the genesis of the Greek belief in demons and therewith in angels, too.⁶⁰ Already Plutarch reckoned with several possibilities of such an influence. Besides the *magoi* following Zarathustra and the Thracians following Orpheus he also mentions the Egyptians and Phrygians.⁶¹ He is thinking of the early time in Greek history that is probably of the 7th and 6th centuries BC. For this influence we will have to take into account several waves from the Near East following one another. One of these waves was the age of Hellenism and the first Roman emperors. During this epoch a syncretism was produced – also concerning the messengers of heaven and Hades, the good and evil angels; particularly Judaism and furthermore Christianity with its doctrine of good and evil spirits, angels, and Lucifer's train supplied the material for this.⁶² Plato and Xenokrates offered already some hints at the doctrine that besides the other elements also the air had its particular creatures, namely the souls of the deceased viz. demons / spirits; later the Stoics elaborated this. This offered an intellectual bridge which was used mainly by the Jewish theologian Philo

55 Cumont, anges; Andres, Angelos; Michl, Engel 55f.

56 Plato, de re publica 10:619b.

57 Michl, Engel 55f.

58 Preisendanz, Fluchtafel 1-29, especially 6-8.

59 Speyer, Fluchmächte.

60 Michl, Engel 57f.

61 Plutarchus, de oraculorum defectione 10,414F-415A; Bidez / Cumont, mages 16f. (B 5). – For Plutarch's doctrine of demons Zintzen, Geister 644-647.

62 Michl, Engel 57f.; Nußbaum, Geleit 949f.

of Alexandria in the 1st century AD.⁶³ Probably among his associates the Pseudo-Orphic fragment of a hymn (which was presumably written by some learned Jew) was composed; it praises the cosmic god with these words: "Angels who take a lot of trouble surround your fiery throne; the mortal ones are the subject of their care..."⁶⁴ As the centuries after Alexander the Great generally bring about a harmonization and a synthesis of the Greek world and the Near East, this harmonization may be shown also with respect to the divine and demonic messengers.

The theoretical treatment of angels in the "Chaldean Oracles" and in the school of Plotinus is something running beside the main stream of Christianity. Starting from Porphyrius' notes Iamblichos and Proklos produced a doctrine of angels by fusing the respective Greek traditions starting with Hesiod; they also bore in mind, though, Jewish and Christian ideas and doctrines about angels. We cannot present this doctrine of Neoplatonic religious philosophy here.⁶⁵

The Etruscans assimilated their god Turms to Hermes Psychopompos⁶⁶. Etruscan religious ideas concerning the deceased are characterized by male and female winged spirits. In respective illustrations they accompany the souls to the hereafter. They are not punishing demons, but spirits – sometimes carrying scrolls in their hands – which can be interpreted as messengers of death or guides of souls.⁶⁷ The winged Tuchulcha is known by name.⁶⁸

Finally we just hint at the idea of the *genius* which scholars are discussing controversially.⁶⁹ Probably it means the divine essential vitality inherent in each human being since his procreation and birth.⁷⁰ Under Greek influence the *genius* then became the tutelary spirit both in a good and in an evil sense.⁷¹ Correspondences between the Greek *daimon* understood as an attendant of the individual's life and the Roman *genius* and also the guardian angel are most evident.

63 Heinze, Xenokrates 112f., supposes that Poseidonios is the intermediary. For Poseidonios cf. Zintzen, Geister 642f.; Theiler, Poseidonios 1, 310f.; 2, 316-320 for Poseidonios, De heroibus et daemoniis. – For Philon cf. Maier, Geister 626-640; especially 638.

64 Orphicorum fragmenta 691F Bernabé = 248 Kern; cf. West, Orphic poems 35f. – Michl, Engel 55, has to be emended accordingly.

65 cf. Michl, Engel 58f.; Zintzen, Geister 647-667.

66 Pfiffig, Religio 104f., with illustrations. The representations of winged demons depend on Greek models.

67 Pfiffig, Religio, Reg.: "Damonen, geflügelte".

68 Pfiffig, Religio 334f.

69 Schilling, Genius 53-70.

70 Nußbaum, Geleit 912f.

71 Schilling, Genius 71-75; 76f. on angels of nations and the church.

7. Retrospect

Greeks, Etruscans and Romans have elaborated the idea of beings who are intermediaries between men and the divine world both in texts and iconography. Considering the phenomena in the *kosmos* or the *physis*, *natura* formed the basis for this.⁷² At first they were conceived more in the sense of signs than materially. Basically men perceived the world and their relationship to it as a dialogue: the deity reveals itself in the *kosmos* and speaks to men through it; unlike men in modern times who are feeling exposed, man felt included in an all-embracing whole, in the *kosmos* abounding in significance. Divine signs covered the distance between the supernatural-divine existing mysteriously and man; divine messengers as they were described above belonged to these signs.

Summary

The idea of the divine messenger, *angelos*, permeates Greek, Etruscan and Roman cultures from the beginning to the end. Whereas Iris und Hermes appear as *angelos* in Homer, in Hesiod we find the first sketch of protective and guiding spirits, who became more elaborate in popular religion and in religious philosophy up to Neoplatonism. We cannot ignore an inner relation between the belief in a personal divine messenger and the divine signs from heaven, like certain birds, signs effected by birds, and the celestial voice. In Rome the idea of the *genius* is characteristic. We have to take into account that there was influence from the Ancient Near East and from Hellenistic syncretism.

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II.

